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Voting for Democracy and Autocracy? An Empirical Examination of Changes in Election Outcomes in Myanmar, 2010-2015

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Abstract

While the 2015 Burmese election was a major victory for the pro-democracy National League for Democracy (NLD), this election poses an interesting puzzle: the NLD's vote share in 2015 was equivalent to that won by the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in 2010 despite the fact turnout was nearly identical in both elections. This raises the possibility that many voters cast their ballot for a pro-military party with autocratic roots in 2010 and a party with a history of opposing military rule in 2015. We argue that tactical voting can explain this puzzle. Pro-democracy voters preferring another party may have voted tactically for the USDP in 2010 to stave off the ascent of an even more hardline authoritarian party. Conversely in 2015 pro-democracy voters could cast their ballot for the NLD and pro-military voters had to vote tactically by rallying behind the USDP. These results have implications for how we understand voting behavior in elections taking place in transitioning contexts and in the shadow of authoritarian rule.

The 2015 elections in Myanmar produced a sizable victory for the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by pro-democracy activist Aung San Suu Kyi. After boycotting the 2010 elections due to what the NLD claimed was an unfair electoral system designed to prevent the NLD and its leader from competing, the NLD scored huge wins in the 2012 by-elections, which foretold a major landslide for the party in 2015. Despite concerns the party would be robbed of its victory the same way it was after the 1990 elections (the only free and fair election up until that point, and the last election to be held for 20 years), the military accepted the results of the 2015 election and allowed the NLD to take its seats in Parliament.

Despite the scale of the NLD's 2015 victory, its victory was not assured, and some doubted the party maintained the popularity it enjoyed in 1990. In particular, there was a possibility the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) might edge out the NLD (or at least prevent the party from winning a majority of seats). This view was particularly shared by leading figures in the USDP, who anticipated a sizable vote for the party to retain power. This view was supported by the strong showing by the USDP in the 2010 elections, in which the party won just under 57 percent of the vote nationwide for the Pyithu Hluttaw (little different from the NLD's 57 percent vote share in 2015). Though the USDP would be reduced to just over 28 percent in 2015, the scale of the party's 2010 victory led some – especially, but not exclusively, within the USDP – to wonder whether the USDP would legitimately deny the NLD its expected victory at the ballot box.

These election results present an interesting puzzle: what explains why the USDP was so successful in one election but defeated so badly in the next? While the absence of the NLD in 2010 is certainly the most obvious part of the story, the NLD boycott alone does not explain why the USDP won a vote share in 2010 roughly equaling the NLD's vote share five years later. Particularly puzzling is the fact that the NLD's landslide was not accompanied by a massive increase in turnout: contrary to the view that the NLD was propelled to victory in 2015 by a wave of voters who boycotted the 2010 elections in protest of undemocratic elections but turned out in 2015, turnout in 2015 was nearly identical to turnout in 2010 (22,423,369 votes in 2015, compared with 22,421,123 votes in 2010). This means that a sizable share of voters cast their ballots for the NLD in 2015 would have supported a pro-military regime party like the USDP or competing in 2010. But how could this be given the NLD's commitment to democracy?

To explain how these results could occur, we examine nationwide election results in 2010 and 2015, as well as the by-elections of 2012. We argue that the discrepancy between the 2010 and 2015 results is due to voters shifting their voting behavior to match the changes in party offerings. In particular, we argue that the absence of the NLD in 2010 and the presence of another pro-military party, the National Unity Party (NUP), created incentives for tactical voting by erstwhile NLD supporters. The considerable presence of the pro-authoritarian NUP, which gained nearly 20% of the vote in 2010, created a spatial dynamic in which the USDP was a more soft line, albeit still pro-military, offering than the NUP. Voters who preferred the NLD therefore had incentives to cast their ballot for the USDP in 2010 to decisively keep the NUP from power. Once the NLD was able to compete in 2012 and 2015 the spatial distribution of parties shifted and the USDP was now a hardline party relative to the NLD. The NUP faded into irrelevance as its voters shifted to the USDP as the party with the best chance of adopting conservative pro-military policies.

These changes in voting behavior, we argue, reflect Burmese voters trying to maximize the benefits they receive from the outcome of elections in ways that reflect their preference orderings – much like voters in Western democracies. This argument has bearings not only for the future of Burmese politics, but also for the dynamics of elections in hybrid authoritarian and transitioning regimes. If the military wished to use its incumbency advantage to lock in its electoral power, it underestimated both the popularity of the NLD and the capacity for Myanmar's electorate to vote tactically. This finding adds to existing evidence that while the outgoing military junta may have done a good job of solidifying its constitutional and economic power, it failed in entrenching its electoral power.

This paper begins with an empirical puzzle, applies theoretical approaches to posit explanations, tests them against the empirical record, and derives further theoretical implications from the findings. The next section examines the details of the Burmese case in greater detail whilst spelling out the puzzle addressed in this paper. Following that, we outline the theory behind our argument. The section after that explains the details of our research design before proceeding to a section discussing the results of our analysis. A concluding section discusses implications of this finding for the future of electoral democracy in Myanmar and for the study of elections in transitioning regimes.

Elections and Party Politics in Myanmar

Elections during the period of Ne Win's dictatorship from 1962 to 1988 had mostly been showpiece affairs in which Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) would win between 85% and 100% of the vote with over 90% voter turnout (Morgenbesser 2015). After nationwide protests throughout 1988, Ne Win resigned and the subsequent military junta that took power promised to hold multiparty elections. The NLD won those elections in 1990, which were the first free and fair elections in the country's history. After seeing its favored party trounced in the elections, the military argued that the vote was actually to populate a constitutional assembly, not to form a government (see Tonkin, 2007). In nullifying the results, military leaders instituted a regime that would allow them to dominate Burmese politics for the next two decades as it drafted a new constitution (Dukalskis 2009). The military liberalized on its own terms, releasing a constitution in 2008 and scheduling elections for 2010.

Although elections were held in 2010, the NLD – which had been victorious in 1990 – declined to compete. The NLD boycotted because electoral laws at the time required it to expel its leader Aung San Suu Kyi in order to contest the poll on the grounds that she had a criminal record (which itself stemmed from politically motivated persecution of her) (BBC 2010). While many assumed that the 2010 elections would be a ruse designed as part of a strategy to keep the military in power (see Pedersen 2011; Williams 2011), to declare these elections completely unfree and unfair would be a mistake. Certainly, the country's strict laws regarding the eligibility of candidates (and their parties) serving prison sentences and/or with foreign ties made competition difficult for politicians like Aung San Suu Kyi, who was under house-arrest during the 2010 elections (Burma Fund, 2011). Even more consequential were the country's censorship laws and intimidation, which made it difficult for opposition parties to compete effectively

(Dukalskis 2017).

Even with these obvious deficiencies in mind, the fact remains that the 2010 elections were indeed multiparty elections, with 47 registered parties competing. Even though the USDP won a clear victory, several other parties were able to compete effectively and win substantial vote shares, with some even winning parliamentary representation. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem: 2018) project, which measures the quality and extent democracy globally since 1900, coded Myanmar's 2010 election as freer and fairer than the 1990 elections in terms of registration fraud, systematic irregularities, opposition intimidation, vote buying, and electoral violence. When measuring the elections against a thick conception of high-quality democracy that includes factors such as freedom of expression, quality of representation, level of fraud, and so on, the 1990 and 2010 elections are coded as roughly the same.

After 2010 and the ascent of reformist USDP president Thein Sein, two major rounds of elections were held in which the NLD were given sufficient assurances that they would be allowed to compete effectively, and thus contested the elections alongside the other major parties that had competed in 2010. These were the by-elections of 2012 to replace 40 seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw that had been vacated after the 2010 elections (37 of which were contested; three in Kachin State were postponed), and the 2015 general elections. In the 2012 by-elections, the NLD would go on to win every seat. These by-election victories foretold the landslide that was to come in 2015, in which the NLD would win a commanding majority of seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw (the lower house of Parliament) and displace the USDP from government (see Dukalskis and Raymond, 2017). Only the military's reserved seats (25 percent of the total number of seats) would prevent the NLD from being able to amend the constitution unilaterally.

The vote and seat shares for the major parties in 2010 and 2015 elections to the Pyithu Hluttaw are listed in Table 1. In 2010, the USDP won a majority of both the vote and seat shares. Two other parties won sizable vote shares as well: the National Unity Party (NUP), which was the party formally representing the military's interests until the formation of the USDP, and the National Democratic Force (NDF), which was a collection of politicians who broke away from the NLD in order to contest the 2010 elections. Although both parties garnered respectable vote shares across most of the country (though these were not of any real threat to the USDP's victory), neither party won many seats due to the bias against smaller parties in first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral systems like the one used in Burmese elections (on the impact of FPTP systems on the translation of votes into seats, see the seminal studies by Duverger [1954] and Rae [1967]).

Table 1 about here

By 2015, the USDP was swept out of power by the NLD, which won not only a majority of seats, but also a majority of votes across the country. The USDP, in contrast, was reduced to less than half its 2010 vote share, while both the NUP and NDF were effectively wiped out. One interesting aspect of the reversal of fortunes for the USDP is that although the NLD won an even larger seat majority than its vote majority (due, again, to the workings of the FPTP system), the party's vote share was almost identical to that of the USDP in 2010.

In addition to winning a nearly identical vote share, the NLD's constituency-level vote shares in 2015 were distributed in a very similar fashion to those of the USDP in 2010. This can be seen in Figure 2, which presents box plots summarizing the constituency-level vote shares for both the NLD and USDP in 2010 and 2015 in all constituencies across the country. The box plot for the USDP in 2010 shows that the USDP's constituency-level vote share in 2010 ranged largely between 42.0 and 69.6 percent (the lower and upper quartiles of the distribution), with a median of 55.4 percent. While the party's vote share dropped dramatically in 2015, the NLD's 2015 vote share had a similar distribution, ranging largely between 38.1 and 68.9 percent, with a median of 56.6 percent.

Figure 1 about here

These findings highlight an interesting puzzle: how could the USDP do so well in one election, only to be defeated so badly in the next? Certainly, the USDP expected to attract more votes than it did in 2015 due to its recent record in government. Not only did the USDP-led government extend civil liberties and manage a successful transition to democracy, but the economy grew at tremendous pace: according to World Bank data, the economy grew by an average of 7.65 percent from 2010-2015. With such a record of success, the USDP expected to be rewarded by voters in 2015 despite the presence of the NLD.

The literature on voting behavior would support such a perspective, too. A long line of literature on retrospective voting suggests that while voters will punish incumbents for bad records in office, they will also reward incumbents for good performance (Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981). In particular, the literature on economic voting shows that incumbents are rewarded by voters for their good stewardship of the economy (Lewis-Beck, 1990; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007), a finding which applies to non-democratic governments (Lewis-Beck, Tang, and Martini, 2014). All this suggests the USDP would have benefited from strong economic performance along with the other liberal and democratic reforms pursued in recent years. The fact they did not, then, makes the party's reversal of fortunes in 2015 all the more interesting.

One possible explanation for the success of the NLD in 2015 is that there was a major increase in turnout between 2010 and 2015 as millions of NLD voters came to the polls after boycotting the 2010 elections and displaced the USDP vote. This argument is consistent with the literature on critical realignments and realigning elections in Western democracies (Key, 1955; Burnham, 1970; Mayhew, 2002, p.144), which argue that rapid realignments are accompanied by major increases in turnout. This was most clearly the case with the emergence of socialist parties in Western Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: with the expansion of the franchise to the working classes, Western party systems experienced major realignments as the newly enfranchised voters fueled the success of socialist parties (e.g. Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Rokkan, 1970; Bartolini and Mair, 1990). If correct, this literature predicts that the NLD landslide in 2015 – and the 2012 by-election victories that preceded the 2015 elections – was due to a major increase in voter turnout.

The data, however, suggest that explanations rooted in differences in turnout cannot explain the changes in the aggregate election outcomes observed since 2010. For one, turnout appears to have been consistent across time: whereas 22,421,123 people cast votes in 2010 out of around

29,000,000 eligible voters (Burma Fund, 2011),¹ turnout in 2015 only increased to 22,423,369 in 2015. Thus, there was no major groundswell of support for the NLD in 2015 that did not also vote for the USDP in 2010. Additionally, Figure 2 presents box plots of turnout figures in each constituency in which at least two parties contested the seat. The data show that while turnout may have changed between 2010 and 2015 in particular constituencies, on average, the spread of turnout figures in both elections is nearly identical, as are the median levels of turnout. In 2010, turnout ranged between the lower and upper quartiles of 28,379 and 94,626 voters, with median turnout at 56,984 voters; in 2015, the lower and upper quartiles ranged between 34,552 and 97,805 voters, while the median turnout was less than 10,000 votes higher than in 2010 at 66,602 voters. Though there was a significant increase in average constituency-level turnout between the two elections, this was not of the proportions that could explain the massive shifts in the vote totals observed in Table 1 above. Moreover, the fact that turnout in 2015 overall was only a little over 2,000 votes high than in 2010 (with the discrepancy between average constituency-level turnout due to the greater variance in 2010 turnout at the high end of the turnout scale) reinforces this conclusion. Together, these data suggest the NLD landslide in 2015 was not supported by a massive increase in turnout.

Figure 2 about here

This conclusion is supported further by looking at constituencies over time. In particular, we focus on the 37 constituencies in which there was a by-election in 2012. Examining these particular constituencies allows us to determine whether the landslide victories by the NLD in the 2012 by-elections were supported by an upsurge in turnout (one that was sustained in 2015), which displaced the USDP because its staunch supporters were smaller in number. To examine turnout in these constituencies over time and whether the NLD's 2012 and 2015 landslide victories were the result of increased turnout, we produce a correlation matrix examining the pairwise correlations between turnout in each election on the one hand and NLD and USDP vote shares on the other.

Table 2 about here

This correlation matrix appears in Table 2. The data show that turnout across the three elections is highly correlated, suggesting that turnout was relatively constant across the three elections. Moreover, turnout is not correlated with support for the NLD, which further suggests that the rise of the NLD was not due to a major increase in turnout. Moreover, turnout is significantly and negatively correlated with only the 2015 USDP vote share, and even then only 2015 turnout is significantly correlated (and weakly so). This suggests that the NLD was not swept to power by a wave of increased turnout in either 2012 or 2015.

Thus, the discussion above suggests there is an interesting puzzle to be explained. Although the NLD won a convincing victory in 2015, the fact remains that the USDP won an equally convincing victory five years earlier in the 2010 elections. This difference between the two elections cannot be explained by differences in turnout, as turnout in 2015 was only marginally

¹ Though there are serious concerns with Myanmar's restrictive laws regarding voter eligibility, the number of eligible voters is not much different from the voting-age population, estimated to be around 30,000,000 (United Nations, 2015).

higher than in 2010. This suggests that many 2010 USDP voters (and perhaps other parties' voters as well) switched to vote for the NLD in 2015. This begs the question, given the differences between the NLD's demands for democracy and the support for the military regime among the USDP and other parties, how and why could NLD voters have supported one of the pro-regime parties in 2010? While there have been several excellent studies of Myanmar's recent elections (e.g. Marsten 2013; Selway 2015; Thawnghmung 2016; Rhoden 2017), to our knowledge there has been no systematic exploration of this question. The next section turns to explain how this could be and how such changes in voting behavior, in turn, could explain the differences in outcomes between 2010 and 2015.

Party Preferences and Voting Behavior in First-Past-the-Post Systems

An abundance of literature suggests that the shifts in aggregate outcomes observed since 2010 can be explained as due to voters shifting their behavior in response to how the available choices of parties match their preference orderings. One of the principal models of voting behavior (Downs, 1957; Enelow and Hinich, 1984; Merrill and Grofman, 1999) is based on the idea that voters hold preferences that are fixed (i.e. unchanging), rank ordered, and transferable (i.e. if a party choice was eliminated, voters preferring that party would transfer their support to the next available party in their rank ordering of parties). Assuming voters are unconstrained in their ability to choose freely, voters will select the party closest to their own preferences. If, for instance, preferences can be arranged along a single dimension of competition and parties compete by adopting a position on that dimension, voters locate themselves along this axis of competition and choose the party closest to their own.

While the underlying tendency is for voters to select the party closest to their own positions, voters are often constrained in their ability to choose their most-preferred party by the electoral system. This is particularly the case in first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral systems like the one used in Burmese elections. In FPTP systems, the party that wins the most votes – even if this number only constitutes a plurality of the vote – wins the seat. This means that if a party places second or worse in constituencies across the country, it will fail to win any seats – even if the party wins a sizable number of votes. Particularly disadvantaged are third parties: while the top-two parties often win a sizable number of seats, third parties routinely fail to win many seats, resulting in severely disproportionate ratios of seat to vote shares.

One consequence of FPTP systems is that the mechanics of translating votes into seats has a psychological effect on the behavior of voters. For voters supporting a party likely to place third or worse in their district, it will make sense to desert that party in favor of a less-preferred party with a better chance of winning if supporting one's most-preferred party results in a party winning the district that they prefer even less (McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1972; Riker, 1982; Cox, 1997, pp. 78-79). Even though one is not able to elect their most-preferred party, electing the second most-preferred party is better than one's least-preferred party being elected because the second most-preferred party is closer to one's position than the least-preferred party. Such 'tactical voting' – and in particular, the transfer of support to less-preferred parties in order to prevent even worse outcomes – helps to explain why many third parties in FPTP systems fail to win many votes.

The logic and implications of fixed, ordered, and transferable preferences applied to the case of Myanmar helps to explain the aggregate patterns of vote shares observed since 2010. First, the strong performance of the USDP, NUP, and NDF in 2010 followed by the collapse of these parties' vote shares in 2015 despite roughly consistent turnout in both elections can be explained by the absence of the NLD. Voters showing up to both the 2010 and 2015 elections would have needed to vote for another party in 2010 (as voting for the NLD was not an option). Assuming they had ordered preferences, these voters would simply have voted for their second most-preferred party in their preference ordering.

This NLD vote would have divided among the available list of major parties that did compete, including the NUP, USDP, and NDF. The NUP grew out of the socialist-militarist authoritarian party of Ne Win, the BSPP (Stokke et al. 2015). Its authoritarian legacy and the fact that it was the military proxy party in the stolen election of 1990 means that its credentials as a "hard line" authoritarian party were well established (see O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). The USDP, while also a military-aligned party, nonetheless is associated with Myanmar's partial liberalization from 2008 to 2010, and could be seen as more of a "soft line" authoritarian party than the NUP. The absence of the NLD in 2010 means that voters with pro-democracy preferences therefore had incentives to vote in that election for the USDP. Once the NLD contested the 2012 and 2015 polls, those voters had no reason to vote for the USDP unless they were persuaded by its performance in the interim. Though some of each party's vote share was doubtlessly rooted in the support of loyal partisans whose first preferences were each of these parties, this argument predicts that the discrepancies in the outcomes between 2010 and 2015 can be explained as low-preference voting behavior when most voters' first preference did not contest the election; when the NLD did compete in 2015, these voters switched their votes to the NLD.

Applying arguments regarding the transfer of votes to less-preferred parties in FPTP systems may help to explain why the USDP continued to fare relatively well in 2015 when the other major parties did not. At this point the tactical voting story changes and pro-NUP voters now had strong incentives in a FPTP system to cast their ballot for the more soft-line USDP as the pro-military party with the best chance of securing power. Because the USDP was the largest party going into the 2015 elections, it was best placed to encourage and attract tactical votes from pro-regime voters. For voters supportive of the military regime, the USDP offered the best chance of stopping the NLD from taking control of government. This would have particularly been the case with NUP voters, as the NUP is the party that formerly controlled the country after the 1990 elections.

In addition to tactical voting among 2010 NUP voters, we would predict that the collapse in NDF vote shares was due to their 2010 voters voting tactically in 2012 and 2015. Although some pro-democracy voters who supported the NDF in 2010 may have wanted to stick with the party in 2015, these voters would have been better served by voting tactically for the NLD. While the NLD may have been less preferable to these voters than the NDF, voting tactically for the NLD offered the best chance for democrats of all stripes to defeat the military in 2015. In addition to the likelihood of tactical voting among pro-democracy voters, there is also reason to expect similar behavior among pro-regime voters as well. For those NDF voters placing themselves closer to the USDP's position on the democracy-authoritarianism axis than the NLD's position,

voting tactically for the USDP would be preferable than supporting the NDF in 2012 and 2015 due to the fact that the USDP's chances of defeating the NLD were greater than the NDF's.

Data and Method

To examine whether there was evidence of voters shifting their behavior in response to both the presence/absence of the NLD and the incentives provided by the FPTP system, we examine aggregate vote totals from the 2010 and 2015 general elections to the Pyithu Hluttaw, as well as the 2012 by-elections. Lacking individual-level data regarding voters' preferences, examining aggregate-level data is able to provide clear – albeit indirect – evidence of such shifts in voting behavior. If we see systematic shifts in votes from one election to the next between parties in ways hypothesized in the previous section, then this would provide evidence that these shifts were due to voters realigning their behavior in response to the presence of the NLD and the incentives provided by the FPTP system.

We focus on data from the 37 constituencies contested in both the 2010 and 2015 elections to the Pyithu Hluttaw, as well as the 2012 by-elections. Examining these constituencies allows us to examine how support for the USDP evolved over time. We focus on estimating support for the USDP across the three elections because they were the two largest parties which were capable of attracting tactical votes from pro-democracy and pro-regime voters, respectively. Specifically, examining these constituencies allows us to estimate how much of the support for the parties competing in 2010 sincerely preferred the USDP – versus those preferring other parties but voting tactically the USDP. Because the number of voters turning out to vote in these 37 constituencies was relatively consistent across the three elections, examining the impact of 2010 vote shares for the three parties mentioned above – USDP, NUP, and NDF – on 2012 and 2015 USDP vote shares allows us to estimate the share of 2010 USDP voters who voted consistently for the USDP across the three elections, as well as the shares of 2010 NUP and NDF voters who shifted their voting behavior in response to the emergence of the NLD by voting tactically for the USDP in 2012 and 2015.² Additionally, by examining USDP vote shares in both 2012 and 2015, we are able to estimate whether tactical voting increased in the 2015 elections in response to the strong performance of the NLD in 2012.

In terms of expectations, we should see that some measure of support for the USDP in 2012 and 2015 came from NUP supporters voting tactically for the USDP. In addition to the USDP's core voters who remained loyal to the party in 2012 and 2015 (a share we can estimate using the 2010 USDP vote shares), we would expect that a sizable share of voters preferring and voting for the NUP in 2010 voted tactically for the USDP in 2012 in order to try to prevent the NLD from winning their constituency. As it became even clearer the NLD were the party to beat going into the 2015 elections, we would expect the share of NUP voters voting tactically for the USDP to have increased even further. To a lesser extent, such tactical voting may have been observable among a share of 2010 NDF voters as well.

² Though there is an obvious concern that these three variables are not independent of one another – as higher vote shares for one party lead to lower vote shares for the other two – the larger concern of multicollinearity due to this non-independence is not merited in this instance: variance inflation factor scores for these variables are all under acceptable limits.

Additionally, the discussion in the previous section predicts we should observe that a share of 2010 NDF voters (i.e. the most pro-regime voters) voted tactically for the USDP. While we might expect that the bulk of 2010 NDF voters supported the NLD in 2012 and 2015 due to the fact the NDF was founded by several breakaway NLD members and took one of the clearest pro-democracy positions of parties contesting the 2010 elections, we would expect that a nontrivial share of the NDF's most pro-regime voters voted tactically for the USDP in 2012 and 2015. To be sure, when faced with a choice between the two largest parties – the pro-democracy NLD and the pro-regime USDP – most 2010 NDF voters were probably closer to the NLD's position on a democracy-authoritarianism axis. However, we would expect that those 2010 NDF voters located closer to the USDP's position than the NLD's voted tactically for the USDP (instead of voting sincerely for the NDF).

To estimate the impact of such transfers on 2012 and 2015 USDP vote shares, we model each party's vote share in each election separately using the 2010 vote shares of the USDP, NUP, and NDF in the 37 constituencies contested in the 2010 and 2015 general elections, as well as the 2012 by-elections. In addition to variables measuring each party's 2010 vote shares, we also include a variable measuring the change in turnout between 2010 and the election in question (e.g. change in turnout between 2010 and 2012 in models predicting NLD 2012 vote shares) to account for the possibility that the USDP's collapse (and the NLD's success) was due primarily to increases in turnout since 2010, as voters who sat out the 2010 elections in solidarity with the NLD's boycott turned out to vote for the NLD in 2012 and 2015. To account for variance specific to each state, dummy variables for each state were also included.

Models were estimated using seemingly unrelated regression (Zellner, 1962). We use this estimator due to the likelihood that estimates from each election are correlated; as a result of this correlation, estimating each variable separately will result in standard errors that are downwardly biased. Using seemingly unrelated regression corrects for this possibility by adjusting for the correlation observed in the error terms of each model.

Results

The results are presented in Table 3. We begin by analyzing the coefficients for the constant in each equation. While y-intercepts often lack interesting substantive interpretations, we must interpret the constant in these equations because each represents an across-the-board vote penalty for the USDP.³ The coefficient of -0.18 suggests that – net of the other variables in the model – the USDP lost 18 percentage points in each constituency from its 2010 vote share in 2015 (while

³ While we cannot be certain that these coefficients reflect only tactical or other forms of preference-based voting – e.g. campaign effects or local contexts – part of the vote penalty represented by each coefficient may reflect preference-based voting on top of what is implied by the coefficients for each of the three party-specific vote share variables. Though we cannot interpret how much of these estimated vote penalties is due to preference-based voting behavior, this means that the extent of tactical voting and preference-based party switching between elections may be underestimated, thereby highlighting the importance of such explanations for understanding the changes observed between 2010 and 2015.

the coefficient of -0.11 suggests that the party lost 11 percentage points from its 2010 constituency-level vote share in the 2012 by-elections). These results are in keeping with the argument that many voters casting ballots in both 2010 and 2015 sincerely preferred the NLD, but because they could not vote for the party, the USDP (and other parties contesting the 2010 elections) benefited from the NLD's absence; when given the chance to vote for the NLD in 2015, these voters switched their votes away from these parties and opted for the NLD.

Table 3 about here

Turning to the coefficients for the three party-specific predictors of USDP vote shares in 2012 and 2015, the results confirm the conclusions reached above suggesting that many 2010 USDP voters continued to vote for the party in 2012 and 2015. The coefficient of 0.58 implies that as 2010 USDP vote shares increase by one percentage point, 2015 USDP vote shares increase by 0.58 percentage points. This relationship suggests that – after discounting the across-the-board 18 percentage point reduction in USDP support, and after accounting for differences in turnout between the two elections – 58 percent of 2010 USDP voters continued to support the USDP in 2015 because they preferred the USDP over all alternatives. A considerably smaller (though still sizable) proportion (0.43, or 43 percent) of 2010 USDP voters supported the party in 2012.

These results suggest that a significant proportion of voters turning out in all three elections sincerely preferred the USDP. While the shares of 2010 USDP voters defecting to the NLD dealt a huge blow to the USDP's vote shares in 2012 and 2015 (in turn, explaining why we observed such a wild swing from the USDP to the NLD in 2015), one reason why the USDP's vote share did not collapse to a greater degree than it did in 2012 and 2015 is because a sizable share of the party's 2010 voters preferred the USDP over all other alternatives – even after the NLD entered the 2015 contest. That said, while many 2010 USDP voters sincerely preferred the USDP over all alternatives – and thus voted consistently for the USDP across the three elections – a sizable proportion preferred and thus voted for the USDP in 2010 when the NLD did not contest the election, but switched to vote for the NLD in 2012 and/or 2015 because they preferred the NLD over the USDP.

The coefficients for the variables measuring 2010 NUP and NDF vote shares imply that another reason why the USDP maintained a sizable vote share in 2015 while parties like the NUP and NDF did not is that the USDP benefitted from tactical voting. As the largest pro-regime party, the USDP was best placed to prevent the NLD from winning in 2015. Given this, the USDP was also best placed to attract tactical votes from pro-regime voters in both the NUP and NDF looking to defeat the NLD.⁴ The coefficients for NUP and NDF vote shares suggest many – though not most – voters preferring the NUP or NDF over other alternatives preferred the USDP

⁴ One interesting example illustrates this tactical behavior. In the constituency of Thanatpin, the NUP won in 2010 with nearly 75 percent of the vote while the NDF finished in second with the remaining 25 percent; the USDP did not contest the seat so as not to waste resources on a safe seat for the NUP. With the emergence of the NLD in 2012 and 2015 (which won with 77 and 68 percent of the vote, respectively, in those elections), many pro-regime NUP and NDF voters switched their support to the USDP, which contested Thanatpin in 2012 and 2015 and won 19 and 24 percent of the vote, respectively (while the NDF did not contest the election and the NUP garnered only three and four percent of the vote, respectively).

over the NLD. This is reflected in the positive coefficients for both parties in the models predicting support for the USDP in 2012 and 2015, which imply that considerable shares (though, again, not a majority) of both parties' voters voted tactically for the USDP as the party with the best chance to defeat the NLD. Interesting to note is that the coefficients for both parties are larger in 2015 than 2012. This suggests that while some 2010 NUP and NDF voters may have continued to support these same parties in 2012,⁵ when faced with the prospect of a NLD government in 2015, even more voters preferring the NUP and NDF voted tactically for the USDP. That said, the fact that less than a majority of both parties' voters supported the USDP in 2015 suggests that significant shares of both parties' bases of 2010 voters voted for the NLD in 2012 and 2015 because they preferred the NLD over these and all other parties.

It is also interesting to note that these results hold despite accounting for the impact of changes in turnout on support for the USDP. In contrast to the argument that the NLD's success was due to massive swings in new voters who stayed home in 2010 turning out in 2012/2015, the variable measuring the impact of change in turnout since 2010 is not significantly correlated with USDP vote shares in 2012. While increases in turnout are associated with significantly lower vote shares for the USDP in 2015, this finding does not alter the conclusions reached above noting that USDP support in 2010 was strongly correlated with higher vote shares for the party in 2012/2015.

In summary, the results presented here suggest that the reason for the dramatic shifts in voting behavior between 2010 and 2015 was that a considerable share of voters altered their voting behavior in line with their preference orderings. While many voters preferred the USDP over other alternatives in 2010, a sizable share of 2010 USDP voters preferred the NLD over the USDP, and thus voted for the NLD when it contested the 2012 and 2015 elections. This helps to explain the dramatic shift from the USDP majority in 2010 to the NLD majority in 2015. Such preference-based voting also helps to explain the demise of parties like the NUP and NDF. Pro-regime voters supporting the NUP and NDF in 2010 voted tactically for the USDP in 2012 and 2015 because they preferred the USDP to the NLD – which in turn helped to sustain the USDP whilst the NUP and NDF vote shares collapsed. Though some 2010 NUP and NDF voters voted tactically for the USDP, and while a smaller share continued to support these parties in 2012 and 2015, a large share of these parties' 2010 voters voted for the NLD in 2012 and 2015, suggesting these parties did because they preferred the NLD to all alternatives.

Conclusion

This paper examined the puzzling finding that emerged between the 2010 and 2015 elections in Myanmar: even though voter turnout remained constant between 2010 and 2015, there were sizable shifts in the outcomes, with the pro-military USDP winning roughly the same share of the vote as the pro-democracy NLD. To explain these outcomes, we draw from the cross-national

⁵ Replicating the analyses in Table 3 using NUP and NDF vote shares as the dependent variables suggests roughly four and six percent of 2010 NUP voters continued to support the party in 2012 and 2015, respectively; an estimated three percent of 2010 NDF voters supported the party again in 2012, while the share of 2010 NDF voters supporting the party in 2015 was indistinguishable from zero.

literature regarding the impact of preference orderings on voting behavior. This literature suggests that many voters supporting one of the parties that competed in 2010 only did so because their most-preferred party – the NLD – did not contest the 2010 elections. When offered the choice to support the NLD in 2015, many of these voters apparently switched to support the NLD in 2015. Moreover, the NLD was supported by tactical voting, whereby pro-democracy voters preferring other parties voted for the NLD in order to prevent the pro-military USDP from winning another term in government.

Our findings support the argument that the reason for the changes in outcomes is that a significant share of voters realigned their voting behavior in 2015 in response to the emergence of the NLD. Though a number of 2010 USDP voters backed the party again in 2015 because they preferred the USDP over the alternatives, a majority of USDP voters switched to vote for the NLD in 2015. The results presented above suggest that while many 2010 USDP voters preferred the USDP over the alternative parties competing in 2010, they switched to vote for the NLD in 2015 because they preferred the NLD over the USDP.

Additionally, the results also suggest that the major changes in party fortunes is due to a significant amount of tactical voting. The results suggest that a majority of voters supporting the NUP and NDF in 2010 voted tactically for the less-preferred NLD in order to defeat the USDP. The results also suggest that the USDP has benefitted from a considerable amount of tactical voting from NUP and NDF voters. Although these voters do not constitute a majority, significant shares of both parties' 2010 voters switched to support the USDP in 2015, suggesting that while they may have preferred the NUP or NDF, they voted tactically for the USDP in order to maximize the chances of defeating the NLD.

These findings have larger implications for the study of elections and authoritarian transitions. The first concerns the importance of institutional design and authoritarian learning. The conventional wisdom about Myanmar's liberalization in 2010 was that the military opened up from a position of relative strength and could control the process. This means that it had a unique opportunity to craft institutions to its advantage. And yet, it chose an electoral system ill-suited to its own perpetuation in power and underestimated the capacity of the electorate to vote tactically. This findings adds to literature that questions the ability of authoritarian leaders to craft institutions that do precisely what they want them to do in the ways they prefer (Pepinsky 2014). Autocrats sometimes misread and misunderstand institutions in ways that functional analyses miss. Second, authoritarian legacy parties are not the same and pro-democracy voters may vote tactically for the "lesser of two evils" amid a boycott by major pro-democracy parties. In addition to examining why opposition parties boycott elections and how it influences their performance in that election, this case highlights that boycotts can shape electoral results multiple cycles into the future. This has special relevance for hybrid and liberalizing regimes in which elections are treated seriously. Third, reserve domains put pressure on democratically elected-parties. Myanmar's military holds enormous extra-electoral power in the current political system. The civilian politicians hold portfolios that are difficult to in which so succeed for an underdeveloped country: health, education, transport, and so on. Delivering progress in these areas is difficult and so failure may see voters punish elected parties while the military retains its institutional advantages. Comparative analysis of reserve domains may illuminate these processes and test hypotheses about such institutional arrangements.

Turning to Myanmar, it is worth considering a recent study by Morgenbesser and Pepinsky (2018), which argued that elections in Southeast Asia are more often the result of democratization processes rather than the cause of democratization. With regard to Myanmar's 2015 election specifically, the study is skeptical of the impact of the result to further democratize Myanmar. And yet, looking forward to the future of Burmese politics, the results suggest a favorable future for pro-democracy parties going forward. Assuming the military does not undo the democratic domains of politics in Myanmar since the NLD's landslide victory in 2015, and early signs suggest the military will remain respectful of the outcome of the 2015 election, the fact that the results presented here suggest pro-democracy voters outnumbered pro-regime voters – despite the numbers voting tactically for the USDP to prevent the pro-democracy NLD from winning – mean that future party-based efforts opposing the NLD's vision for democracy will likely fail at the ballot box. Although the future looks bleak for the politics currently supported by authoritarian legacy parties, the results suggest there is opportunity for parties like the USDP to transform themselves into legitimate opposition parties if they play by the new rules of the game. Because the NLD's majority vote share in 2015 was supported to a significant extent by tactical voting, this means an opposition party perceived to respect democracy may be able to appeal to those swing voters and have a chance of displacing the NLD from power. If one of the parties defeated in 2015 is willing to play by the rules of elections, that party might have a chance to defeat the NLD by appealing to voters' concerns rooted in economic issues and/or issues related to Myanmar's ethnic and religious diversity.

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Figure 1: Constituency-Level Vote Shares for the USDP and NLD in the 2010 and 2015 Elections to the Pyithu Hluttaw

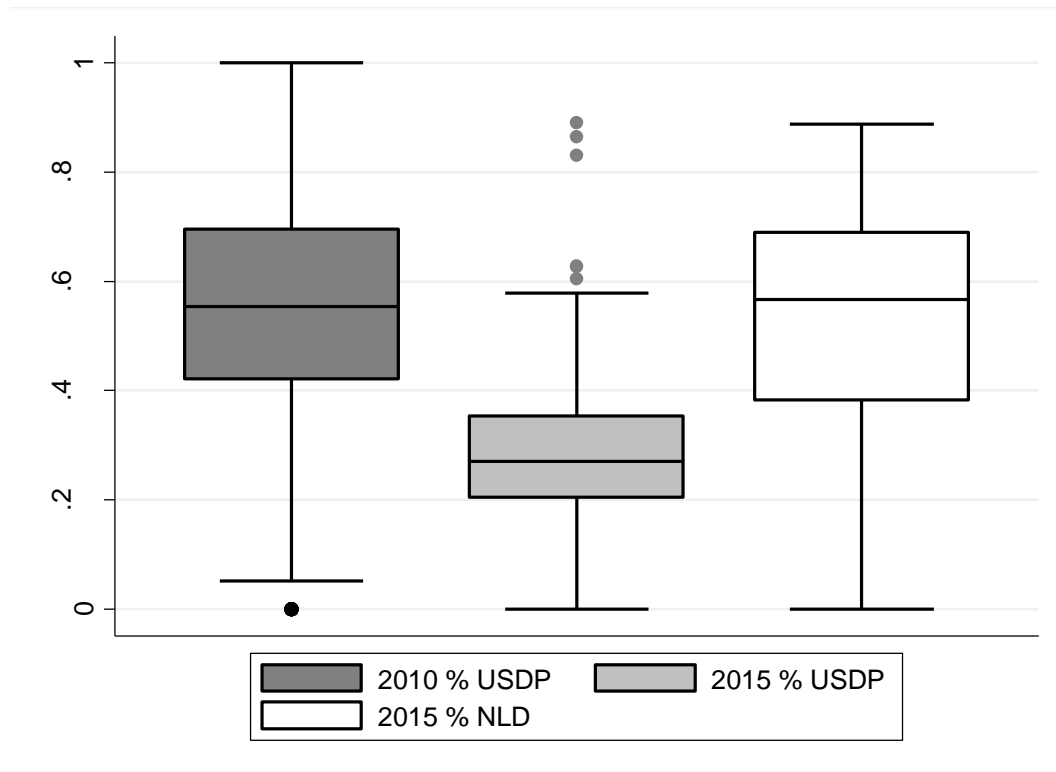


Figure 2: Constituency-Level Turnout in the 2010 and 2015 Elections to the Pyithu Hluttaw

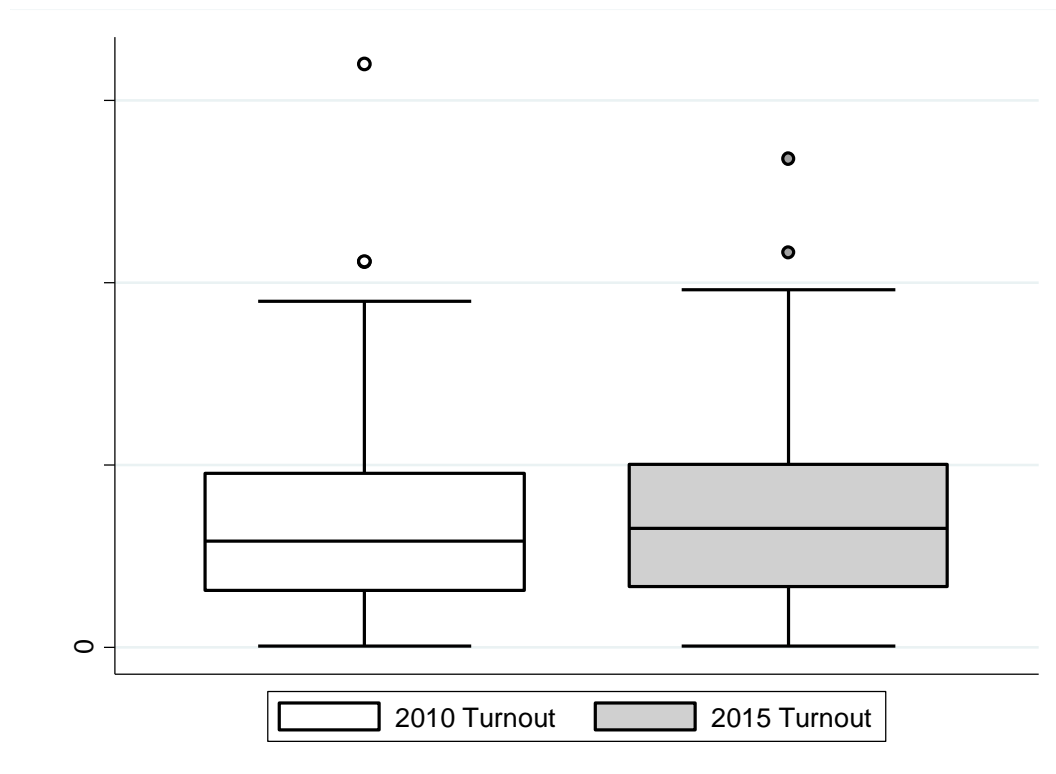


Table 1: Vote and Seat Percentages for Selected Parties in the 2010 and 2015 elections to the Pyithu Hluttaw

Party	2010		2015	
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats
Union Solidarity and Development Party	56.76	58.86	28.28	6.80
National League for Democracy	-	-	57.06	58.00
National Unity Party	19.44	2.73	1.87	0.00
National Democratic Force	7.10	1.82	0.50	0.00

Percentages under votes are the percentages of 'Votes' nationwide while percentages under 'Seats' are the percentages of the total number of seats in the House of Representatives. Note that column percentages do not sum to 100 due to missing parties (in the case of vote percentages) and the omission of the seats explicitly reserved for the military.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix for Turnout, % USDP, and % NLD Variables in the 37 Constituencies Contested in 2010, 2012, and 2015

Variables	Turnout			% USDP			% NLD	
	2010	2012	2015	2010	2012	2015	2012	2015
2010 Turnout	1							
2012 Turnout	0.93*	1						
2015 Turnout	0.88*	0.90*	1					
2010 % USDP	0.06	-0.09	-0.03	1				
2012 % USDP	0.07	-0.10	0.01	0.64*	1			
2015 % USDP	-0.08	-0.18	-0.34*	0.42*	0.68*	1		
2012 % NLD	-0.10	0.07	-0.05	-0.51*	-0.94*	-0.67*	1	
2015 % NLD	-0.18	-0.05	-0.17	-0.36*	-0.82*	-0.62*	0.92*	1

Entries are Pearson's product-moment correlations. * $p < 0.05$, two-tailed tests. $n = 37$ for all correlations.

Table 3: Regression Analysis of Constituency-Level Support for the USDP in 2012 and 2015

Explanatory Variables	Year	
	2012	2015
2010 % USDP	0.43 (0.12)*	0.58 (0.15)*
2010 % NUP	0.26 (0.12)*	0.36 (0.15)*
2010 % NDF	0.17 (0.15)	0.45 (0.19)*
Δ Turnout, 2010-2012	-0.08 (0.06)	-
Δ Turnout, 2010-2015	-	-0.20 (0.08)*
Ayyarwaddy State	0.04 (0.04)	0.09 (0.04)+
Bago State	0.01 (0.04)	0.05 (0.05)
Magway State	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)
Mandalay State	0.03 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.04)
Mon State	0.03 (0.06)	0.10 (0.08)
Napyitaw State	0.07 (0.04)+	0.06 (0.05)
Sagaing State	0.03 (0.04)	0.06 (0.05)
Shan State	-0.03 (0.06)	0.13 (0.08)
Tanintharyi State	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.07)
Yangon State	-	-
Constant	-0.11 (0.10)	-0.18 (0.12)
χ^2	66.11*	67.52*
R^2	0.63	0.62
n	37	37

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, two-tailed tests. Entries are linear regression coefficients with seemingly unrelated standard errors in parentheses.